

Paper presented to “*Repositioning The Social At The Heart Of The Anthropocene: A Transdisciplinary Dialogue*”. School of Anthropology and Conservation, University of Kent 30-10-11/2016

Includes in Panel 2: *Challenging (im)moralities: breaking the hegemonic game?*

http://www.kent.ac.uk/sac/events/anthropocene_symposium/conference.html

Anti-Politics in the Anthropocene

Peter Cox¹ & Ben Revi²

Abstract

The governing logic of the neoliberal world seeks to impose strict policy outcomes without all the trouble of political debate. Neoliberal governmentality is constructed as ‘apolitical’ or, in James Ferguson’s words, an ‘anti-politics machine’, a function of economic science, conceived by experts (such as independent reserve banks, committees and advisors) whose recommendations determine appropriate social behaviours and methods to encourage their practice. Politicians are judged not on their skill in delivering agreement and compromise, but rather on their skill at delivering balanced budgets and economic growth.

This sets up an interesting proposition. When the overwhelming majority of the world’s climate scientists advocate policy to address the threat of climate change, how does neoliberalism react? Counterintuitively, many neoliberal actors have sought to undermine the authority of climate science. This has caused a rift in the governing logic of neoliberalism, as it selectively abandons the ‘anti-politics’ positivism it is built on. Therefore, the anthropocene as a mode of understanding could present a discursive challenge to neoliberal hegemony, exposing the paradoxes and contradictions that lie within the anti-politics agenda.

We argue, therefore that the nurture of moral political debate is a crucial task of an anthropocene mode of understanding, one already emergent in activist movements. While these movements are frequently characterised as anti-political in themselves, we argue that instead they should be understood as prefigurative of new extensions of democracy.

Writing began partly in response to Joanna Zylińska’s chapter in minimal ethics and conversations conducted across spaces between strangers. Two starting points, Bauman divorce between power and politics, against the background of his earlier work on the holocaust and modernity, coupled with Ferguson’s critique of neoliberal governmentality as an anti-politics machine. We suggest that it is not simply neoliberal, but all modernist politics that carries antipolitical as its shadow, so that to move forward we need to re-evaluate the terrain of the political and frequently unconsidered normative assumptions about a progressive politics, especially against the backdrop of postcolonial critique.

Introduction

Bauman (2012) writes tellingly of the contemporary divorce between power, the capacity to make things happen, and politics, the capacity to make choices about what is desirable. Such a degree of

¹ Corresponding author: Social and Political Science, University of Chester, peter.cox@chester.ac.uk

² Department of Social and Political Science, University of Chester

pessimism about the fate of the political under the ideological shadow of neoliberal governmentality is widespread. In the British parliamentary session of autumn 2015, debates have posed the question whether certain practices of fiscal judgement should be governed by legal statute beyond questions of debate or decision making by politicians. Committees of experts have been appointed to decide on major infrastructure decisions explicitly in order to take such spending decisions out of the realm of parliamentary debate. Discounting the perversity of arguing that different and contradictory economic logics should apply to citizens and the state to which they are subject and whether expert committees staffed by former politicians are in any way meaningfully independent, the governing logic of contemporary neoliberalism invokes pre-existing strands of political ideology in its ever-mutating identity. Both laissez-faire and managerial liberalism appear as drivers (or not) of policy at various times. A cynical perspective might consider the relative merits of these positions to governments and their selective deployment as reflecting their differential capacity to maintain the advantages of politico-economic elites, dependent on situation and context (Milliband 1977). Simultaneously, significant areas of public life are deemed as territories of non-politics, of inappropriate areas of governance. Laissez-faire and its variants have always dictated the deliberate withdrawal of the political from selective areas of public life and their control by other forms of expertise. The corollary of course is that British politics has always been reluctant to intervene in sectors of public life even when some form of intervention was clearly required (especially when such intervention might be perceived as to be to the detriment of established elite privileges in or out of government (Cox 2012))³.

In the current era, neoliberal governmentality, one can legitimately conclude, is constructed as 'apolitical'. In James Ferguson's (1994) words, it becomes an 'anti-politics machine': a function of economic science, conceived by experts (such as independent reserve banks, committees and advisors) whose recommendations determine appropriate social behaviours and methods to encourage their practice. Self-justifying policies follow developmental trajectories, regardless of actual outcomes and almost immune to any wider audit than their budgetary coherence. Politicians are judged not on their skill in delivering agreement and compromise, but rather on their skill at delivering balanced budgets and economic growth. One should note, however, the degree to which economic

³ The classic example is in the case of roads policy in the 1930s resulting in a code of conduct, rather than legislative intervention, to address the rising death rates caused by the behaviours of private motorists.

calculations are effectively fictive, dependent on which data are deemed relevant. Undesired outcomes can be cleansed from the calculus and disregarded as externalities.

Perhaps perversely, this takes neoliberal politics into the same mode as managerial tendencies within authoritarian communist regimes. The Stalinist adoption of Fordist production and Taylorist management similarly echoed a desire for the maximum efficiency of process.⁴ At the other end of “left” politics, social democratic urges toward efficiency and rational arrangements of socio-economic order reveal an urge and desire for legitimacy within this metanarrative of modernity. Thus, we should not be surprised at the retreat into renewed demands for eco-modernity by many who seek to respond to growing understanding of the Anthropocene, even those coming from within a relatively radical approach to environmental politics. The eco-modernist manifesto fits precisely into this narrative structure.

This inconsistency, however, renders neoliberalism vulnerable to its own internal contradictions. When the abdication of government to selected experts results in the same expertise advocating policy intervention, then the role of political debate shifts again and finds itself on unstable foundations. Political necessity drives neoliberal actors to try and undermine the expertise which they themselves utilise for self-legitimation. This is not simply a problem of neo-liberalism but of the positivistic logics which it has deployed through its emergence and which underpin its own self-comprehension.

How do these processes of governance and tendencies within neoliberalism’s conception of economic development relate to the Anthropocene as a conceptualisation of socio-political relations? Is it possible to re-evaluate, even to challenge the political and social nihilism and inertia of the anti-politics machine?

Politics and anti-politics

In a political frame of reference, it matters how modernity is understood in relation to human history and where it stands in relation to both the Holocene and the Anthropocene. To put it in the form of a

⁴ In Joris Iven’s Film *Komsomol* (1933) on the construction of the works at Magnitogorsk, it is notable that even the dragline excavators that make the mining possible are imported from the USA [made by Bucyrus Erie].

question, is modernity the logical endpoint of the Holocene, or does it mark the commencement of a new form of sociality in the Anthropocene. In the latter case, eco-modernism is implicitly rationalised as an appropriate mode of thought, taking seriously a novel dispensation of human self-understanding and reflexive capacity for action. Conversely, the former perspective problematizes both eco-modernism and modernity itself.

Haraway (2015) suggests that we see the anthropocene as a boundary layer, marking the severe discontinuity between periods of geologic time. What comes after will not be like what came before. In the transition we live in uncertainty where old rules no longer apply but new codes and processes are unfamiliar – hence Zylinska’s call for a minimal ethics as an appropriate mode of response. Seen through this perspective, the significance of anti-politics as the ultimate product of modern political discourse is that it creates its own destruction. Anti-politics undermines the grounds for its own generation. Divorced from politics, ethics must find a new location in human sociality, and in doing so creates a new political space, without reference to (and potentially without room for) existing political discourse. For those currently engaged in the practice of political engagement, anti-politics with its corrosive effect on the political, is a terrifying inertia a disengagement with the necessary task of both administration and choice making. Its threat is even felt by those neoliberals political existence depends on its nurture. Yet there is a sense in which this destructive inevitability also can be inverted.

Shifting to earlier practices of critical politics, we might think of the dispute between Marx and Bakunin, both critical of industrial capitalism and both wedded to a positivist political modernism. Marx and subsequent iterations of scientific socialism⁵ sought a meaningful history in the pursuit and development of a logical and rational extension of the present. Revolutionary conditions needed to but these would be borne out of the contradictions of the present. Conversely, Bakunin sought destruction, even without the formation of post-revolutionary institutions, as a creative act in its own right, a necessary clearing of the ground. The trajectories of developments in left politics lock-in assumptions of the future as an extension of the present, predictable from current forms, however altered. On the political right, the neoliberal anti-political will demands the same ineluctable claim that there is no alternative. (History is an unfolding of events driven by their own mostly inevitable

⁵ This even extends to anarchist traditions within this mode – see for example Bookchin’s emphasis on the essentiality of meaningful history.

narratives to be chronicled. Historiography cannot be understood as contested ground, only as a more or less accurate rendering of closed events). It is worth noting here the shift from sustainability to Anthropocene as a framing language. While both express similar concerns the very word sustain carries the act of perpetuation of preexisting systems. Conceptualising Anthropocene as a readable stratigraphic break allows perhaps a bakuninist sweeping away, or the 'cut' that Joanna Zylinska drew our attention to, and allows us to think that there are alternatives that can break with existing trajectories. Extinction can be revisited as a creative act if we lose pathological ideas and practices (as Alf Thornburg described money)

For the ecomodernist, perhaps, the inevitable conclusion must be that the Anthropocene is a logical extension of the holocene, transformed in scale, but not in kind, in which the promises and claims of modernity must be pursued with ever greater commitment in order to sanctify our inevitable impact upon the ecosphere. Certainly, there is a consistent rationality to this conclusion within its own frame of reference, even if it might also appear somewhat hubristic.

Refuting the discourse of the anti-political cannot be done in its own terms. The very writing of its premises presupposes hegemonic pervasiveness over the defining territory of the political. Yet it is at this very point that we should begin to identify the historical realities of the many and myriad counter-narrative possibilities that exist alongside, above below and in the interstices of dominant frameworks of hegemonic discourses. Political history is full of counter narratives that are discounted from canonical tradition (Bey). To counter the hegemonic discourse of neoliberalism requires more than framing its antithesis. We need to extend beyond the framing of potentials as A and A'. Can it be possible, or might it be necessary to reimagine the world of possibility where $A'' \neq A$.

Joining with Collard, Dempsey and Sundberg (2015) we are tempted instead to embrace the need for manifestoes as declarations of transition, which, following Latour, they endorse as "a declarative format that makes a path-changing proposal". Of course, this also echoes the impact of Haraway's immensely valuable earlier work, which had the effect of invigorating the search for a post-human politics. Such imaginative leaps are necessary if the imagining of the future is not to be restricted as simply an extension of the present. One must consider whether we can trust the same cognitive processes that have brought us to the limits also to transcend them. The suspicion of this presenter is that more of the same will not magically create new potentials for action.

If we move our political perspective from the anthropocentric to the anthropocene (as a critique of the former) we might begin to see that the question of how then political thought can move forward to find new imaginaries is not to ignore everything that has gone before but to understand the need for the reframing of the political. Assumptions of perspectives of total knowledge, and its accompanying phantom demon of total power, of course predate modernity. It is the knowledge of good and evil as a 'shameful' betrayal of human destiny that echo through two millennia of Christian interpretation of the biblical mythos. Modernity's response to that narrative of original sin is to endeavour to become ever more cognisant of the operations of the world: and thus of our ability to master it. Hence, politics as a project of modernity carries the anti-political as its necessary shadow. What Thomas Paine could not have foreseen in his celebration of the politics of reason over the irrationality of monarchical rule was that reason could pursue its triumph to an entirely logical foreclosure of possibility as it frames its own developmentalist teleology. If, as traced earlier, we can interpret the reluctance to intervene as one inherent dimension of liberal and neo-liberal politics, its converse is visible in the post-war growth of development discourses (Rist). Truman's 'four freedoms' speech articulated both the malaise of underdevelopment and its cure through the application of technology and politics modelled after 'developed' western political economies. The pathologising of diversity without addressing the causes of inequality curtails the possibility of alternative economies, itself another form of anti-politics, and renders the political process impotent and irrelevant since it has failed to deliver legitimate results as defined by the "already developed". If pursued to its logical conclusion, development and developmentalism become restricted to a series of actions beyond the realm of political choice or debate. Development addresses a pathology that, in itself, is a product of the lack of those very self-same measures proposed for its solution. A perfectly circular logic. By extension, the configuration of sustainable development is no more than a further layer of inevitability, with added moral imperative extending beyond the immediate human subject.

Seeing what politics has become in its divorce from power, assists in identifying and lamenting the rise of anti-politics, but obscures to the onlooker the third essential dimension of this universe of thought and practice: ethics. Part of this erasure might be understood as a product of modernity's concealed metanarrative of progress. Progress, alongside its pragmatic twin of development, is almost the essence of Ferguson's identification of antipolitics. Even ethics is in danger of reductionism, becoming no more than justification for utilitarianism (which also, incidentally, reaches

the same circular nihilism between the 18th and 21st centuries: the pursuit of the greatest happiness for the most number has succeeded in producing the greatest immiseration for the highest number).

It is tempting, at this point to concede the inevitability of, and even to embrace nihilism and pointlessness as the only logical conclusions of this nexus of ideas. But, this is also the point at which the insights of critical postmodernism's revitalisation of post-relativist ethics comes into play. There is a large body of work to call on but to summarise, if nothing matters, then everything matters. The destruction of metanarratives takes away the regulations that govern behaviours but since we continue as agents in the world – and the Anthropocene centralizes and highlights that agency – we are empowered to examine the import and impact of our actions at every stage. We cannot simply assume that a course of action is 'progressive' and therefore justifiable. The terrible ambiguity of all of our human action should not paralyze us unto inaction but encourage mindfulness. Within the narratives of modernity, agency is shackled to the growth of expertise. The growth of expert knowledge is distanced from the experience of practical action, the academy divorced from the craft school. The point of the development of specialist knowledge and expertise is to relieve the non-expert of the burden of decision: the negation of agency and the foundation of anti-politics.

Politics currently defined and understood is logically self-reductive and thus Leinfelder is absolutely correct in his claim that "politics alone will not be able to institute the changes necessary to create a sustainable society" (2103: 13). In proclaiming that the personal is political, feminist action demanded attention not just to redefining what is significant, but also demanded a reframing of the application of political concepts. When Boaventura de Sousa Santos argues for the uncoupling of democracy from its confinement within the political realm at the heart of his rethinking social emancipation project, I suggest that the same desire is invoked. In pursuit of counter-hegemonic globalizations, he seeks to reclaim the power of democracy as aspiration, a vision of transformative potential across a series of time spaces. When connected with anthropocene perspectives, Santos' anti-hegemonic democracy with its redefined demos chimes powerfully not only with Haraway's call for rethinking kinship but also with other voices in the exploration of new materialisms (e.g. Bennet). Democracy as procedure; may have run its course but as a means of revaluation, as hymned in work such as Carpenter's 1890's poem *Towards Democracy*, it has barely left the start line.

The importance of Santos' wider project and its particular relevance to addressing anti-politics in the Anthropocene is that it is forged from an epistemological shift originating not in abstract theory but in the lived experience of those involved outside of the conventional centres of political or economic thought. Reinventing social emancipation as the broader project is titled hinges around an epistemological break with the modernist political trajectory. He raises the vision of justice against epistemicide through a new relationship between epistemology and subjectivity. Indeed a central point of Santos' analysis is that "we are facing a modern problem that, nevertheless, cannot be solved in modern terms" (2014:72). To unite this reframing with agenda of the new metaphysics (Latour and Harman book series) for open humanities press is not an impossibly arduous intellectual task.

For Santos, as for Kathi Weeks and others rethinking work, labour and production, Bloch's focus on possibility is a key to reawakening, but the ethico- political task of the 'not yet' is not predetermined by the politics of the anti-hegemonic democratic urge. The exact shape of practice and operation is open to the local and specific. This is an open-ended commitment to emergence as a political task, thus breaking with the trajectory of the political under modernity. It also lays claim to the necessity of the emotions as a vibrant and vital source of praxis, contrasting the axiology of progress with the axiology of care. Here we enter shared territory with Braidotti, Bryant (2011) and Colebrook (2014). Above all, I would argue that the Joanna Zylińska's *Minimal ethics for the Anthropocene* (2014) benefits from a cross reading with Santos writing. New materialist critical theory provides profoundly important theoretical tools for understanding the ethico-political implications of the Anthropocene, deploying the tools of hegemonic thought against itself. The danger of this approach for us all as academics is that it constantly risks the danger of remaining beyond ownership by all but specific elites among whom these knowledge have been generated and reproduced. Their reproduction, even as critique may continue to reproduce privileged elites. Conversely, Santos' critique emerges from the voices of the historically colonized rather than the colonizers.

Tentative Conclusions

Returning to our starting point, modernist politics intractably progresses towards its own negation in anti-politics while in the embrace of progressive and seductive narratives of development. To address this problem and to attempt remedy for this is not to embrace a new primitivism or any other form of antithetical politics. Rather it requires us to follow the voices that have been raised and framed as

contributing to a post-developmental politics. This is not to privilege a particular position or to reject all emancipatory hopes. It is to reconfigure the emancipatory process and to provide constant critique of its own expectations and practices. Placing the social into the Anthropocene is to place a new emphasis on the relationship between structure and agency, and to recognise both history and critique as crucial aspects of our anthropocene politics. Here, as Trischler has suggested (ESEH discussion panel Versailles June 2015) the Anthropocene serves as an heuristic rather than descriptor. It enables us to ask new questions and to be challenged in our expectations. While it is easy to talk about dematerialization the Anthropocene reminds us that today is an age of production and of the material more than ever it has been historically. The flaw in Marx' inspired historical materialism as a politics of the Anthropocene is not its emphasis on the material but its accompanying modernist emphasis on the rational to the preclusion of another aspects of apprehension and comprehension of the world. Utopian worlds of possibility and imagination - the very things that fuel actual everyday activism - are material realities in agentic movements.

The Anthropocene, as a mode of understanding, recognizes our multispecies and multi-being entanglements. Beyond anti-politics is anti-antipolitics but this is not the same as the original politics of modernity of which anti-politics was the shadow. Instead the political is reframed in a third dimension as an injunction of care for kith and kin, recognizing and refuting our histories of paternalism and colonialism while seeking ways to create new spaces of democracy for a newly acknowledged demos. If the problematic limitations of modern politics lies in its underexamined relationship with modernity's claims to progress, it should be no surprise to find that a new politics is being forged among those who have confronted that narrative through their rejection of developmentalism.

However we should make one final cautionary note to balance overeager enthusiasm. Marx himself assumed that he was at the moment of birth of a new era, in geologic time he may well have been correct. In organisational terms he was standing at a new acceleration point as Christophe Bonneuil pointed out, but one of accelerating inequality and conflict, not of a new mode of equality. Perhaps more sweeping away needed to be done. Things have to die, there is a scalar of life, some things persist a long time before dying, some things pass away rapidly. Is the necropolitical trajectory of neoliberalism really a manifestation of its necrophobia?

References and bibliography

- Bauman, Zygmunt (2012) *Liquid Surveillance* Polity Press
- Bey, Hakim TAZ
- Bryant, Levi R. (2011) *The Democracy of Objects* Ann Arbor, MI: Open Humanities Press
- Colebrook, Claire (2014) *Sex after Life: Essays on extinction volume 2* Ann Arbor, MI: Open Humanities Press
- Collard, Rosemary Claire; Dempsey, Jessica & Sandberg, Juanita (2105) A Manifesto for abundant futures *Annals of the association of American Geographers*.105(2) 322-330
- Dolphijn, Rick and van der Tuin, Iris (2012) *New materialism Interviews and Cartographies* Ann Arbor, MI: Open Humanities Press
- Ferguson, James (1990) *The Anti-Politics Machine: 'development', depoliticization, and bureaucratic power in Lesotho* Cambridge University Press
- Haraway, Donna 1985 Cyborg manifesto
- Haraway, Donna 2015 Anthropocene, Capitalocene, Plantationocene, Chthulucene: Making Kin *Environmental Humanities* (6) 159-165
- Kothari, Rajni (2007) *Rethinking Democracy* London: Zed
- Leinfelder, Reinhold (2013) Assuming responsibility for the Anthropocene: challenges and opportunities in education pp. 9-28
- Miliband, Ralph (1977) *Marxism and Politics* Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Newman, Saul (2011) Postanarchism: a politics of anti-politics *Journal of Political Ideologies* 16(3)
- Santos, Boaventura de Souza (ed.) (2005) *Democratizing democracy: Beyond the liberal democratic Canon* London: Verso
- Santos 2014 *Epistemologies of the south* Boulder CO: Paradigm
- Trischler, Helmuth (ed) (2013) *Anthropocene: Envisioning the Future of the Age of Humans* Munich: RCC Perspectives 2013/3
- Weeks, Kathi 2011 *The problem with work. Feminism, Marxism, Antiwork politics and postwork imaginaries*. Durham NC, Duke University Press

Footnotes and observations

If the anthropocene marks the point at which the human species irrevocably makes its indelible mark on the on-human, then it is also the point at which the agency of the non-human most visibly asserts itself, in not adapting to the rate of change adopted by human species, but continuing its own changes at a different pace.

It is tempting to make the same argument as the whole of this paper through a cultural studies lens, focusing on John Lyndon's song writing over 40years. From *No Future*, through *Rise* (anger is an energy) to the most recent *What the world needs now (is another "Fuck off, Murderers")*.